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AUTHOR	Espelage, Dorothy L.
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ABSTRACT

One notable gap in the evolving literature on bullying and victimization during early adolescence is the role that peers play in promoting such behavior by either reinforcing the aggressor, failing to intervene to stop the victimization, or affiliating with students who bully. This Digest looks at the limited research available on the role of the peer group in bullying to learn more about how bullying and victimization might emerge or continue during early adolescence. The Digest notes definitions of bullying, research on changes in the function and importance of the peer group at early adolescence, evidence that peers play an instrumental role in bullying and victimization even at the elementary school level, and research on the dynamics of needing to "fit in" during transition to middle school. Factors such as age and sex on the influence of peer group on bullying are also examined. The Digest concludes by noting that it cannot be assumed that bullying among young adolescents is a simple interaction between bully and victim; rather there are groups who support and sometimes participate in this behavior. (HTH)

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By

Dorothy L. Espelage

November 2002 **EDO-PS-02-16**

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Bullying in Early Adolescence: The Role of the Peer Group

Dorothy L. Espelage

A recent study in the Journal of the American Medical Association demonstrated the seriousness of bullying in American schools. In a nationally representative sample of over 15,686 students in the United States (grades 6 through 10), 29.9% self-reported frequent involvement in bullying at school, with 13% participating as a bully, 10.9% as a victim, and 6% as both (Nansel et al., 2001). Aggression and violence during childhood and adolescence have been the focus of much research over the past several decades (e.g., Loeber & Hay, 1997; Olweus, 1979). These researchers have found that serious forms of aggression remain relatively stable from childhood through adulthood; however, Loeber and Hay (1997) argue that mild forms of aggression may not begin for some children until early or late adolescence. Despite Loeber and Hay's findings, very little research has been conducted on mild forms of aggression, such as bullying, during the middle years. One notable gap in the evolving literature on bullying and victimization during early adolescence is the role that peers play in promoting bullying and victimization by either reinforcing the aggressor, failing to intervene to stop the victimization, or affiliating with students who bully. This Digest looks at the limited research available on the role of the peer group in bullying to learn more about how bullying and victimization might emerge or continue during early adolescence.

Definitions of Bullying

While definitions of bullying often differ semantically, many of them have one concept in common: *Bullying is a subtype of aggression* (Dodge, 1991; Olweus, 1993; Smith & Thompson, 1991). The following definitions are common in the literature: "A person is being bullied when he or she is exposed, repeatedly over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students" (Olweus, 1993, p. 9). "A student is being bullied or picked on when another student says nasty and unpleasant things to him or her. It is also bullying when a student is hit, kicked, threatened, locked inside a room, sent nasty notes, and when no one ever talks to him" (Smith & Sharp, 1994, p. 1).

Peer Acceptance and Status

During early adolescence, the function and importance of the peer group change dramatically (Crockett, Losoff, & Petersen, 1984; Dornbusch, 1989). Adolescents, seeking autonomy from their parents, turn to their peers to discuss problems, feelings, fears, and doubts, thereby increasing the salience of time spent with friends (Sebald, 1992; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). However, this reliance on peers for social support is coupled with increasing pressures to attain social status (Corsaro & Eder, 1990; Eder, 1985). It is during adolescence that peer groups become stratified and issues of acceptance and popularity become increasingly important. Research indicates, for example, that toughness and aggressiveness are important status considerations for boys, while appearance is a central determinant of social status among girls (Eder, 1995). Some researchers believe that the pressure to gain peer acceptance and status may be related to an increase in teasing and bullying. This behavior may be intended to demonstrate superiority over other students for boys and girls, either through name-calling or ridiculing.

Setting the Stage for Bullying in Middle School

Research with elementary school children in other countries supports the view that peer group members reinforce and maintain bullying (e.g., Craig & Pepler, 1997; Salmivalli et al., 1996). These authors contend that bullying can best be understood from a social-interactional perspective (i.e., bullying behaviors are considered a result of a complex interaction between individual characteristics, such as impulsivity, and the social context, including the peer group and school social system). Participation of peers in the bullying process was clearly evident when Pepler and her colleagues videotaped aggressive and socially competent Canadian children in grades 1 through 6 on the playground; peers were involved in bullying in an astounding 85% of bully episodes (Craig & Pepler, 1997). Similarly, in a survey study of sixth-graders in Finland, the majority of students participated in the bullying process in some capacity, and their various participant roles were significantly related to social status within their respective classrooms (Salmivalli et al., 1996). Clearly, peers play an instrumental role in bullying and victimization on elementary school playgrounds and within classrooms.

Transition to Middle School and "Fitting In"

Less well understood are the peer dynamics associated with bullying during the transition from elementary school to middle school. Some researchers speculate that this transition can cause stress that might promote bullying behavior, as students attempt to define their place in the new social structure. For example, changing from one school to another often leads to an increase in emotional and academic difficulties (Rudolph et al., 2001); bullying may be another way that young people deal with the stress of a new environment.

A short-term investigation of over 500 middle school students (grades 6-8) found an increase in bullying behavior among sixth-graders over a 4-month period (Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon, 2001). The authors speculated that the sixth-graders were assimilating into the middle school, where bullying behavior was part of the school culture. This speculation is supported by the theory that bullying is a learned behavior, and that as they enter middle school, sixth-graders have not yet learned how to interact positively in the social milieu of the school. Many sixth-graders who wish to "fit in" may adopt the behaviors—including teasing—of those students who have been in the school longer and who have more power to dictate the social norm.

Two recent studies further examined the hypothesis that middle school students opt to bully their peers to "fit in" (Pellegrini, Bartini, & Brooks, 1999; Rodkin et al., 2000). Pellegrini and colleagues found that bullying enhanced within-group status and popularity among 138 fifth-graders making the transition through the first year of middle school. Similarly, Rodkin and colleagues, in a study of 452 fourth- through sixth-grade boys, found 13.1% were rated as both aggressive and popular by their teachers. Furthermore, these aggressive popular boys and popular prosocial boys received an equivalent number of "cool" ratings from peers.

These two studies do not examine how the *influence* of the peer group on bullying behaviors differs across sex, grade, or level of peer group status. A study by Espelage and Holt (2001) of 422 middle school students (grades 6-8), using a survey that included demographic questions, self-report, and peer-report measures of bullying and victimization, and measures of other psychosocial variables, examined the association between popularity and bullying behavior. Despite the finding that bullies as a group enjoyed a strong friendship network, the relationship between bullying and popularity differed for males and females, and also differed across grades. The most striking finding was the strong correlation between bullying and popularity among sixth-grade males, which dropped considerably for seventh-grade males and was not associated for eighth-grade males. Closer examination of peer cliques in this sample found that students not only "hung out" with peers who bully at similar rates but that students also reported an increase in bullying over a school year if their primary peer group bullied others (Espelage, Holt, & Henkel, in press).

Conclusion

We cannot assume that bullying among young adolescents is a simple interaction between a bully and a victim. Instead, recent studies and media reports suggest that there are groups of students who support their peers and sometimes participate in teasing and harassing other students. It seems important for families, schools, and other community institutions to help children and young adolescents learn how to manage, and potentially change, the pressure to hurt their classmates in order to "fit in."

For More Information

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